

Biography of Don Mayes

Don was born on June 5, 1935, at the two-room home of his parents, Kendall B. Mayes and Emma “Bessie” Kelly Mayes, at the Mountain Home community about four miles northwest of Goshen, Arkansas. The home he was born in was built of lumber sawed from trees harvested on the family land. This land was the 1880 homestead of his great-grandfather James Perry Mayes. His grandfather Benjamin Harrison Mayes and his father Kendall B. Mayes were also born on the land. The land, with some acres added, is still owned by the Mayes family. When Don was older and the old house was gone, Don would tease his mother by saying that he had been born in that “trash pit” that remained on the original site.

Even with such firm ties to the family land, Don’s family moved about as he grew up. This was during the Great Depression years, and his dad found it necessary to seek work in other places. When Don was about a year and a half old, the family moved west of Fayetteville to the Lake Weddington area for his dad to work on the WPA project there. The next move was to Buckner, east of Fayetteville, where Don eventually started school. Another big move was to Florida in 1941 or 1942 for his dad to work in the building of a naval air station.

Finally, the family moved back to the farm at the Mountain Home community. The school he attended was located on the family land since his grandparents had donated the land for the building of the school. After Don completed the 8th grade, the Mountain Home school was closed and consolidated with the Springdale School district. Interestingly, the school building was sold and was eventually moved to the Har-Ber Village complex of historical buildings and antique displays at Grove, Oklahoma, where it can be seen today.

Don attended high school at Springdale, and it is easy to see that times have changed from Don’s school days to the present. Don said he often boarded the school bus with a box of shells and a shotgun. He would get off the bus in the afternoon at a friend’s place and hunt until dark.

When he was 16, the family moved to Lubbock, Texas, for a year for his father to work in construction. While there, Don bought a Cushman motor scooter. He brought it back to Arkansas, but it didn’t last too long. He said it was “worn out” when he bought it. It would be a classic if he still possessed it.

At the age of 18, Don joined the navy and served in the “Pineapple Fleet,” which was the U. S. Navy Pacific Fleet based in Pearl Harbor. He was a boiler operator on three ships during his six years of service. By the time he left the navy, he held the rank of boiler tender, 1st class. After his tour of duty in the military, Don returned home and began work in his father’s main profession as a bricklayer.

Another important development in his life came as a result of a swimming trip to Richland Creek, a favorite swimming hole near Goshen, Arkansas. While there he noticed a young lady he had not seen before. He asked who she was and was told she was Mollie McKinney. He talked to her that day, and they began a whirlwind courtship. Thirty-three days later, on August 10, 1963, Mollie and Don were married. They now have three girls: Deanne, Dawn, and Delores.

Another chapter in Don’s life was his employment at Hiland Dairy in Fayetteville. He worked there in the maintenance department for 16 years until his retirement at the age of 62. When he came

out of the navy, he had hoped to find employment in maintenance, and now that goal was fulfilled. He made use of his extensive knowledge of electricity, mechanics, and construction while employed at Highland, skills he often uses in assisting in the work at Tired Iron.

Don's interest in engines came early in his life. In 1944 or 1945, when Don was about 8, a man who worked setting poles for the area Rural Electrification Association had a small Briggs and Stratton engine he had rigged on a pump jack to provide a reliable water supply for his wife. After the availability of electricity made the gasoline engine powered pump jack obsolete, Don asked the man to sell him the engine. He bought the engine for \$1 with money he had earned picking strawberries. Don gained lots of knowledge about engines by removing parts one at a time and replacing them. Finally he was able to repeatedly dismantle the engine, rebuild it, and get it to run. This had to be the beginning of his lifetime involvement with engines and everything mechanical.

The major move for Don's involvement with engines came in 1980 when he saw a program on television about hit and miss engines at Pawnee, Oklahoma. He had seen these type engines as a youth and was intrigued by them. He decided he wanted one. The first engine he purchased was a 2 H. P. Sears Economy hit and miss. He learned later that this was the same engine he had seen at a friend's house when he was in high school. He still has the engine, and it still runs. Don now has over 70 engines and keeps a record on all of them. His extensive research on each engine makes him a "go to" person when anyone wants to know about a particular brand. His favorite engine is the 1929 Stover 2 H.P. he uses to power his Stover saw.

Don and Mollie enjoy traveling each year to several festivals and shows to display a spectacular trailer load of his engines. They regularly attend and display engines throughout Arkansas, including the Watermelon Festival at Hope, the Jonquil Festival at Old Washington, the Clothesline Festival at Prairie Grove, the Annual Car Show at Tontitown, and the Spring Crank Up and the Fall Show of Tired Iron of the Ozarks at Gentry. They often attend the shows at Pawnee, Oklahoma, and Republic, Missouri. Don also displays examples of his extensive collections of antique tools, jacks, hog oilers, corn shellers, cast iron implements, household items, and blacksmith tools. Don also has a collection of five tractors.

An important part of Don and Mollie's involvement with collecting has been their membership in Tired Iron of the Ozarks. Don came to the attention of Tired Iron members Bob Coffee and Clarence Woolley. Bob knew Don from Hiland Dairy, and he encouraged Clarence to invite Don to the newly formed club. Don joined Tired Iron in the charter year and is a charter member of our organization.

Finally, Don is well known throughout the state for his years of searching for diamonds at the Arkansas diamond mine at Murfreesboro. Don and Mollie first went there in 1977. On the first trip he found none, but on a trip there a week later, he found two. Since that first year, they have made four or five trips to the mine each year. Over the years, Don has found about 290 diamonds. Magazine, newspaper, and television reporters regularly interview him for their features about Arkansas diamonds. His diamond collection has been borrowed for display at the University of Arkansas Museum and for special events at the Murfreesboro mine. Most recently, Don can be seen in a Travel Channel feature on the Arkansas Diamond Mine State Park.

A side feature of Don and Mollie's travels is that they have visited and stayed in all 51 of Arkansas' parks. I'm sure they will be among the first visitors when the Mississippi River State Park, Arkansas' 52nd park, is opened in a couple of years. In the meantime, we always look forward to the presence of Don and Mollie at all Tired Iron of the Ozarks events.

